

Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Representative McCrory and respected members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Karen Fritsche and I am here to testify about preserving funding for legal services.

Please let me share with you some of my story to demonstrate why funding for legal services must be preserved. I have submitted written testimony, and my story demonstrates why only legal services had the expertise to help me, that only they do systemic advocacy to help people in a similar situation to my sister's, and why this advocacy is important, because the problems I experienced should not be experienced by anyone else, yet there continues to be a danger that they will be.

In short: 1. I was told that my sister would be denied services medically necessary to keep her alive. 2. I was told that I had no rights to contest this denial. 3. I had great difficulty in finding an attorney to help me.

On January 15, 2011, my sister, Nancy Fritsche, was taken from Hospital for Special Care, where she had been a patient for 6 years, to the ICU of the Hospital of Central Connecticut. She almost died. After 3 days at the hospital, I was told by Hospital of Central Connecticut that I had to sign papers for Qualidigm (hired by DSS) which said that my sister could no longer stay at the HFSC and would be sent to a lower level of care, i.e. to a nursing home. I was frantic, since Nancy's doctor had written just two months before, in November, 2010, that she needed to be at the Hospital level of care because she has severe respiratory problems, degenerative neurological disease, similar to ALS, celiac ataxia and a compromised immune system, which would not survive MRSA (a drug resistant staph infection). I knew that with Nancy's multiple disabilities she needed to be at the chronic disease hospital level of care. In the past, nursing homes could not handle Nancy's problems and had even abused her because she was in need of so much help.

I called Qualidigm and asked how to file an appeal, but they said that Nancy had no rights, that there was no appeal. I called my lawyer, who practices at one of the most prestigious law firms in Hartford, but, because my sister is on Medicaid, having run through her Medicare days, neither he nor anyone in his office had expertise in this area and could not help me. He called over 20 other lawyers in other offices and said that none could take the case. They did not know this area of law. I called other lawyers on my own.

In the meantime, I had to fill out 6 nursing home applications every few weeks and was told that I had to apply to every single nursing home in the State of Connecticut, even if that meant that I had to put my sister in a facility over 3 hours from my home. If a nursing home accepted my sister, when I went over the care plan with them and pointed out that Nancy had been in HFSC for over 6 years, had a trach and severe respiratory problems, progressive, degenerative, neurological disease, celiac disease and other problems, they refused her.

Scott Slifka, Mayor of West Hartford, referred me to the Office of Protection and Advocacy, but they could not help. I turned to Senator Beth Bye, who obtained a copy of the statutes that applied. She helped me fill out a form for an appeal. However, Qualidigm and DSS refused to give even her any information about the standards on which patients were to be judged, saying it was proprietary information. I cancelled a trip I had planned, with no